

Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping



Grasscycling: A Cut Above

There is no question that lawns play a central and emotional role in the American landscape. After all, we spend billions of dollars pampering the patches of turf around our homes, in addition to a disproportionate share of our personal time and energy. If your back is already aching and your wallet feels lighter — you might want to consider joining the grasscycling revolution!

Grasscycling is a proven system for maintaining lawns, which actually allows them to maintain themselves, saving you a lot of effort. It is also the easy, natural way to ensure a healthy lawn, which allows you to recycle valuable nutrients while saving money on fertilizers and other soil amendments.

The program begins when and where the mower blades hit the grass. First of all, grasscycling means *grass-recycling*, leaving clippings behind as you mow. Bagging and hauling bags to the curb will become a sweaty memory.

One of the most important keys to grasscycling is to mow more and cut less. Most lawn jockeys favor mowing once every week, usually on an otherwise quiet Saturday. All of weekend suburbia seems to resonate with the whine, whirr, and putter-putter-put of lawnmowers, and perhaps just a bit of grunting.

With grasscycling, lawns are mowed when the grass needs cutting, rather than sticking to an artificially imposed schedule.

During the active growing season, research and experience have shown that mowing frequency should be increased to once every five to six days. Cutting more often is easier than waiting too long and then trying to tackle a lush jungle of tall grass.

More frequent and proper cutting will also yield smaller grass clippings which can readily filter down to the soil surface and

decompose within days. As the grass particles break down, they will release a treasure trove of nutrients and micronutrients, while also providing a small amount of organic matter, all of which will help to feed hungry earthworms, the soil, and your bit of emerald heaven.

If the prospect of mowing more often puts you off at first, remember that by grasscycling you are not stopping every five to ten minutes to empty the mower bag, putting clippings into a bag or container, and dragging heavy clip-



pings to the curb. In fact, grasscycling typically saves about 40 percent of the time traditionally spent on lawn chores.

Also keep in mind that during the slower growing season, usually the hot, dry summer for most turf varieties, you may not have to mow for ten days or even two weeks at a time — unlike the mowing addicts who continue to mow each week, mostly kicking up dust and pebbles and contributing to smog. Finally, factor in that your naturally maintained lawn will prove to be more weed-free and self-feeding, and you will realize that grasscycling provides a significant net savings in time, effort, money, and environmental impacts.

The basic system relies on a series of simple rules. First, always mow your lawn when the grass is dry. You have probably already noticed that wet grass cuts poorly. Damp clippings will cling to the blade causing ragged cuts; the mower deck (the blade housing) will become clogged, interfering with overall mowing; grass clippings will form unsightly clumps; and clippings won't be able to filter down to the soil surface. Even worse, there are a host of turf-killing disease organisms which are easily spread through a moist environment.

It is also important to sharpen your mowing blades at least once or twice a year to provide a clean, safe, and efficient cut. Dull mower blades will tear and shred the tips of the grass which can provide an

entry point for disease organisms and weaken the grass plant. If your lawn looks gray or dull after mowing, or perhaps turns straw-brown a day or two later, your mower blade is likely dull and causing damage.

Cut at the correct height for your type of grass. Different types of grass require different mowing heights. Cool-weather grasses, including Kentucky Bluegrass, Fine and Tall Fescue, and Perennial Ryegrass should be cut no lower than 2.5 - 3 inches, and should be mowed at or before reaching four inches in height. Warm season grasses, such as Zoysia or Bermudagrass, should be cut to between one-half and one inch, and cut when they reach two inches.

These heights are generally taller than those traditionally used — but for good reason. Taller grass provides more “energy” for the plant's ever-deepening root system, leading to a healthier, more drought-tolerant lawn. Taller grass helps shade the soil,

which can keep soil cooler during hot weather, and provides natural weed suppression by overshadowing some weeds and preventing weed seed germination.

If grass is excessively tall, either slowly work it back its proper height by mowing several times within a week or two, or bag those clippings and use them as a thin mulch around shrubs, flowers, or vegetable plants, or add them to your backyard compost pile.

Another option with tall grass is to “double-cut” it. Simply mow your lawn twice, with the second cut perpendicular to the first passing. The second mowing will further cut up longer clippings and break up any clumps.

And, in the spirit of cutting less, avoid shocking your grass by removing more than a third of the plant's total height. Mowing is actually just a form of frequent pruning, and less is more, especially when preserving the health of the grass plant.



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Joe Keyser is the author of the GreenMan column for the Gazette Newspapers in Maryland, and also host of The Greenman Show. A downloadable library of previous environmental articles, columns, and reviews are available online at greenman.askdep.com. Print copies are also available by contacting DEP at the following locations:

**Montgomery County
Department of
Environmental Protection**
255 Rockville Pike, Suite 120
Rockville, MD 20850
240.777.7770 fax 240.777.7765
email: help@askdep.com
www.askdep.com

